The Pinecone Door

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Part I

Robbin left home with a crust of bread in his pocket and a yellow ribbon tied to his wrist so he wouldn't forget which hand was his right. His mother had been hanging laundry on the line, humming an old song with no words, and didn't notice when he slipped past the gate. The sun was mild, the kind that warmed your ears but not your feet. The air smelled of distant grassfires and something sweeter — maybe apples falling from trees before they were ready.

The hills behind his house were soft and drowsy, green with long grass that flopped over in the middle from its own weight. Robbin kicked through them like a boat through waves, laughing to no one. He passed the stump where a squirrel used to sit last summer, the place where the fence broke and never got mended, and the flat stone where he once saw an ant trying to drag a whole wing.

He followed the path past the orchard and into the edge of the woods. The trees stood tall and polite, letting light trickle through their arms. Ferns tickled his knees. Birds made notes that sounded like questions without answers. A pinecone dropped near his feet. Then another. Robbin picked one up and tossed it into the air. It bounced off a branch and vanished into a bush. He found another. This one had sap on it. It stuck to his palm.

So he threw that one too.

Then he started a game: each pinecone was a knight, and the sticks on the ground were swords. One branch became a gate, another a castle wall. The forest floor was a battlefield. He crouched and leapt and flung pinecone after pinecone, making sounds for swords and monsters and battles where no one ever really died.

The woods watched quietly.

The trees leaned in, just a little.

And Robbin, with sap on his hands and dirt on his elbows, forgot everything else.

The light had moved. He noticed it only when he paused between battles, crouched low behind a mossy root with a bent stick in hand, pinecone "knight" under his arm. The sun, which had been behind his back when he left, now cast long, low bars of light across the trees. The wind had shifted too. It wasn't the warm breeze from home anymore. This one was thinner, shivering through the branches like a whisper trying not to be heard.

Robbin stood and turned slowly. The game was gone now, scattered pinecones half-buried in leaves. "Castle's lost," he murmured, brushing soil from his knees. He didn't remember walking so far. There was no stump, no flat stone, no broken fence — only trees. Taller now. Closer together. Less polite.

He walked back the way he thought he came. Or maybe sideways. Or maybe down a trail that hadn't been there before. The paths seemed to shift. One turned sharply and stopped. Another faded into thorns. He turned again.

The woods grew darker, not with night, but with too many trees, too little sky.

A branch creaked above him. Then another, higher still, like knees bending in the cold. Somewhere to the left, something scurried — too fast for a rabbit. Robbin froze. His mouth felt dry. He listened.

A long hoot drifted through the trunks. Distant, careful. Not a friendly sound. Not unfriendly either — just there. Watching.

"Not lost," he said, though no one had asked. "I just— I was playing—"

No one answered.

He stepped over a thick root and kept walking. The ground had gone soft. There were patches of moss, and under that, puddles of water black as tea. Robbin's shoes were wet now. One had a hole. His foot squished.

The forest said nothing.

He wandered until the shadows turned blue and the air began to smell like damp stone. His arms were tired. His legs prickled. His chest felt full of something slow and heavy. For a moment he thought of calling for someone — but who? His mother would not hear. The trees might. The thing that hooted might.

Instead, he kept walking.

Then, just ahead, he saw something red.

A patch of berries. Round, quiet, sleeping on their stems like heads on pillows.

He knelt beside the berry patch. The ground was soft there, and a hollow tree leaned overhead like an old woman watching a pot boil. The berries looked like the kind in his garden, but a little darker, almost purple. He touched one. It didn't burst. He sniffed it. No smell.

Then he ate it.

It tasted cold. Not sour, not sweet — just cold, like something picked before dawn. He ate another. And another. The juice stained his fingertips a deep red, almost like ink. He wiped them on his pants, then ate three more. His belly felt a little less empty. But something in the air made him sit down.

The moss beside the patch looked soft enough, and a fallen log lay across it like a bench waiting to be used. Robbin sat down slowly, careful not to crush the berries. His legs ached in that slow, stretching way that comes after running in all directions for too long. His eyelids felt heavy. His breath was quiet.

The forest had stopped making sounds. No birds. No creaks. Just the hush of old trees standing very still.

He leaned back, looking up.

There was no sky anymore — just a ceiling of leaves.

A rabbit appeared.

It did not hop or scamper. It simply stepped out from behind a tree, as if it had always been there and had only now remembered to show itself. Its fur was gray, with patches like smoke. One ear stood straight up, the other drooped as if listening to something secret. Its eyes were small, dark, and full of something Robbin couldn't name.

It sat down three feet away and scratched behind its ear.

Robbin blinked once. Then again.

The rabbit cleared its throat.

"Well," it said. "That took you long enough."

The voice was dry and matter-of-fact, like someone announcing the weather.

Robbin stared.

"I— what?"

"I said, that took you long enough. You've been wandering in circles for a while. Even the owl noticed."

Robbin opened his mouth and closed it again. "You're— you're talking."

"Yes. Don't make a thing of it." The rabbit stood on its hind legs and dusted off its front paws. "It's not your ears that are the problem. It's your head. Most people forget how to listen."

Robbin's voice was small. "Am I dreaming?"

"Not yet," the rabbit said. "You're only tired. But you're close."

The rabbit circled the patch of moss twice before sitting again. It sniffed once, stared at Robbin, then tilted its head just slightly.

"You've come farther than most, you know," it said. "Most boys turn back when the trees start to whisper."

"I didn't hear whispering," Robbin said, though even as he said it, he wasn't sure.

"You did. You just thought it was wind."

Robbin picked at a bit of moss near his shoe. “Why did you come to me?”

The rabbit's nose twitched. “I didn’t. You came to me.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Robbin said.

“No one ever does,” the rabbit replied.

There was a pause, like a breath held between two thoughts. Then the air stirred again — a shift in the trees above, a slight tension in the moss.

From the branches overhead, a low fluttering sound came — not fast, not startled, just sure. Then, with the hush of feathers meeting air, the owl descended. It did not flap so much as fall, perfectly, landing on a crooked branch just above them. Its eyes were silver in the low light. They didn’t blink.

The rabbit looked up. “You’re late.”

“I was watching,” the owl said. Its voice was deep and slow, like a drum being played far away. “He was walking in loops. But he didn’t cry, so I waited.”

“I wasn’t going to cry,” Robbin said quickly.

“No,” the owl said. “But you were about to.”

Robbin felt the back of his neck go warm. He stared down at the berries.

The rabbit gave a small, impatient thump with its back foot. “Well, now that we’re all here…”

“There is another place,” the owl said. “He should know that before you take him.”

“I was getting to that,” said the rabbit. It turned to Robbin, sat up straighter, and spoke as if it were reciting something old. “There is a place below this one. Not beneath like mud, but beneath like this one. It has paths no one maps, clocks that run in circles, and things that can’t speak — but still tell you what they want.”

Robbin looked up. “What kind of place?”

The rabbit blinked. “A better one. A worse one. It depends how you walk.”

Robbin’s mouth was dry. “Is it real?”

The owl answered. “It’s more real than most things you believe in.”

The rabbit nodded. “Would you like to see it?”

Robbin swallowed. “I think I would.”

“Then come,” the rabbit said, rising to its feet. “It’s not far. But it takes time.”

They walked together — the rabbit leading, Robbin behind, and the owl gliding overhead without sound. The trees grew taller again, but they were not trees anymore. Some had bark like scales. Some had branches that drooped like curtains. The light grew thick and brown.

And then, just when the air began to smell like stone again, the ground ahead opened.

A hole. No — a door. No — a passage.

It was not built, but grown — out of roots twisted together, with ferns for curtains and a stone arch bent like a yawn. It breathed cold, damp air. It pulsed faintly.

“There,” said the rabbit. “That’s the way.”

Robbin stared down into the passage. The steps were not stone, but something soft and dark, like velvet soaked in rain. A faint glow came from somewhere below, flickering.

“Are you sure?” Robbin asked.

“No,” the rabbit said.

“Yes,” the owl said.

Robbin stepped forward.

And down.

The steps gave way beneath his feet without sound. Not crumbling, not breaking — just folding downward, like pages turning in a book written in darkness. Each step he took felt softer, colder, yet somehow easier. He had the sense that he wasn’t walking down but in — as if the world above were closing behind him not like a door, but like the end of a sentence.

The rabbit hopped ahead without turning. The owl floated down in spirals, brushing the walls now and then with the tips of its wings. Robbin moved more slowly. There was a hum in the air, but no source. The tunnel wound downward in gentle curves. Every so often it forked, or shifted direction, or changed shape — once narrowing so tightly they had to duck, once swelling wide enough to echo a breath.

Here, the walls were made of clay that glistened. There, they were thick with vines that trembled when touched. Once, Robbin saw a small hole in the wall — something glowed faintly behind it, and blinked. He did not look twice.

No roots hung here. No sound of trees. No sound of anything he recognized. The only sounds were the echo of his shoes, the shuffle of the rabbit, and the slow, deep hush of the owl’s feathers as it passed.

After a long while, the tunnel leveled out. The ground was different now — smooth and warm beneath his feet, like walking on the back of some huge animal sleeping just below the surface.

“We’re here,” the rabbit said.

“Where is here?” Robbin asked, but even as he said it, he knew the question didn’t work anymore.

Because ahead of them — suddenly, without announcement — the tunnel opened.

It didn’t end.

It *opened*.

Not like a room, not like a cave — but like a thought being pulled wide.

Before him stretched a vast, glimmering chamber, half lit by mushrooms that breathed light, half cloaked in shadow shaped like wings. Trees grew sideways here. Stones hovered just above the ground. Water ran upward across glassy rocks, vanishing into ceilings that dripped with tiny singing bells.

And figures moved.

Small ones with hats of moss and faces like carved wood. Tall ones with skin like blue fog and long white eyes. One floated. One crawled. One wore a coat made entirely of keys.

The rabbit stopped. “Welcome,” it said, “to the other side.”

Robbin took a step forward.

The moss beneath his foot sighed.

And far above — or far below — something began to hum a lullaby in a language no one had spoken for a thousand years.

Robbin stood still for a long time, watching the lights breathe. The glowing mushrooms pulsed softly — not in time with each other, but like a conversation spoken in flickers. Some were pale green, others gold or violet, and one patch near the far wall blinked like slow lightning.

A faint mist clung to the ground, twisting around his ankles like curious fingers. He could smell strange things now — peppermint and dust, smoke and old honey, the warm iron smell of something sleeping deep in the rock.

The rabbit was already moving forward. It didn’t hop anymore — it walked, slowly and upright, as if the rules of animals no longer applied.

“Stay close,” it said without turning.

The owl perched on a bent iron post that rose from the floor like a dead flower. “This place forgets paths,” it said. “If you stray too far, you may not find yourself again.”

Robbin nodded, but he wasn’t sure what he was nodding to.

They passed a tree with bark like paper — words written all over it, in crooked lines and faded ink. One branch bent down as he passed and tapped him gently on the head. He moved on quickly.

From behind a mound of glowing stones, a creature watched them. It was no taller than Robbin's knee and wore a mask shaped like a teardrop. It didn't move. Just stared. When he looked again, it was gone.

To their right, a bridge arched over nothing. No water, no pit — just open space. The bridge was made of teeth.

Far above, something huge moved slowly through the ceiling mist, but never revealed its shape. It left a trail of wind behind that smelled of apples and ash.

They reached a fork. The rabbit paused.

"One path leads to the Garden of Turning Leaves," it said. "The other to the Hall of Still Whispers."

Robbin looked at both. "Which is safer?"

The rabbit gave a slight smile. "Neither is safe."

"But the Garden listens," the owl said, "and the Hall does not."

Robbin hesitated, then pointed left — toward the faint rustle of leaves like slow applause.

"Then that way," he said.

The rabbit nodded. The owl took flight.

And the boy, the rabbit, and the owl walked on, toward whatever the Garden had been waiting to say.

The passage to the Garden was narrow at first, lined with thin stone columns that twisted like vines frozen mid-grow. Robbin had to squeeze between two that seemed to lean toward each other on purpose. His shoulders brushed their cold surfaces, and a light shiver passed through him, like touching a spider's web in the dark.

Beyond the columns, the ceiling rose high again, but the light was stranger now — not coming from mushrooms or glowing stones, but from the leaves themselves. Leaves hung in the air like lanterns on invisible strings, each one a different color: copper, jade, a bruised violet, a dozen kinds of gold. Some drifted slowly, never falling, just circling. Some stayed utterly still, as if listening.

Robbin stepped onto a path that wasn't made of stone or moss but layered leaves pressed into silence. They gave way underfoot with the softness of dreams. Around him, thick trunks of barkless trees reached upward like arms with no fingers. Where the branches should have

been, there were long streams of ribbon-light stretching across the space and vanishing into the dark above.

He felt watched, though not unkindly. Not quite.

“Why is it called the Garden of Turning Leaves?” he whispered.

The rabbit stopped ahead. “Because the leaves turn.”

Robbin looked around. “But all leaves turn.”

The owl’s voice came from above. “Not these. These remember.”

As if in answer, one leaf broke away from the air above and drifted down toward him. It turned slowly as it fell, and on its surface was a picture — faint, like memory. A house. His house. The yellow ribbon on his wrist. His mother’s hands at the laundry line.

He reached for it, but before his fingers touched, the leaf turned again, and the image changed — a bed. His bed. And himself, lying in it. Asleep.

“Wait,” he said, frowning. “I’m not—”

But the leaf turned a final time and vanished into the mist.

He looked at the rabbit.

“Am I dreaming now?”

The rabbit sniffed. “Does it matter?”

The owl swept low, brushing the tops of the glowing leaves. “Ask the Garden,” it said. “It has better answers than we do.”

And ahead, something began to move — not fast, not slow, just wide. A curtain of vines parting without wind, revealing the heart of the Garden.

Figures stood there. Tall, thin, clothed in silk that shimmered like water, faces hidden behind masks of carved bark and glass.

One of them raised a hand.

Robbin’s legs didn’t want to move, but they did.

He walked forward.

The leaf-path behind him closed.

The masked figure stood beneath a tree whose branches formed an arch high above, and from those branches hung a hundred more leaves, glowing faintly in colors that didn’t have names. The figure’s hand remained raised — not in greeting, but as if it were holding something

invisible above them. Its fingers were long and bark-colored, the tips curled inward slightly, unmoving.

The others stood behind it in a loose half-circle. None of them spoke. Their robes shifted gently, though no wind stirred the garden.

Robbin slowed his steps. The air was different here. Heavy, like walking into a room where someone had just finished whispering.

“Say nothing,” the rabbit murmured beside him. “Not yet.”

The lead figure lowered its hand. And from the canopy above, one leaf fell.

It floated down slowly — far more slowly than any leaf should. It turned as it fell, and as it turned, images swam across its surface like ripples over a pond.

A room.

A book with no title.

A rabbit-shaped silhouette in the corner of a wall.

Robbin stared as the leaf drifted nearer. When it came level with his eyes, it stopped mid-air. The images cleared.

This time, it was him.

Running.

Alone.

Into the woods.

The picture shimmered and vanished.

“Each leaf holds a turning,” said a voice. Not the owl. Not the rabbit. One of the masked figures.

“A turning?” Robbin whispered.

The figure inclined its head. “A place where the path changed.”

“You mean… where I got lost?”

The leaf spun once, slowly. Another image appeared.

Not a forest. A room. A door left open.

A single step taken.

“I wasn’t trying to—” Robbin started, but the leaf turned again.

This time, it showed nothing. Just grayness. Then, gently, it crumbled into nothing before his eyes.

He looked down at his hands. They were trembling, just slightly.

The owl landed on a stone nearby. “The Garden doesn’t speak,” it said. “It shows.”

“And what it shows,” the rabbit added, “you carry with you.”

The masked figures began to move then, not walking, but drifting slowly sideways between the trees, vanishing into the hanging leaves one by one. The last to leave paused and turned its mask toward Robbin.

“Some paths cannot be un-walked,” it said, and then it too vanished into the leaves.

Silence returned.

Robbin turned to the rabbit. “Why did you bring me here?”

“You asked to see the other world.”

“But this— this is like a memory.”

“Some dreams are,” said the owl.

“And some,” the rabbit said, already hopping forward, “are only the beginning of forgetting.”

They walked on, deeper into the Garden, where the leaves began to hum.

The humming wasn’t music. It wasn’t coming from mouths or instruments. It came from the leaves, or the trees, or something beneath the soil. It was a low, restless sound, like wind passing through glass, sometimes rising, sometimes falling, never stopping. As they walked, the path began to shift underfoot — less like leaves, more like a skin, soft and pulsing gently, as though the Garden itself were breathing.

Robbin kept close to the rabbit. He tried not to look too long at any one leaf now. Some of them had faces. Some of them showed rooms he didn’t remember until he saw them, and then wished he hadn’t.

They passed under an arch of branches tangled so thickly they blocked the light. For a moment it felt like night, but not cold. Warm, close night, like under a blanket. And on the other side, the garden changed.

The trees had vanished. In their place stood huge flowers — taller than Robbin, with petals like silk flags, trembling faintly as if they were listening. One opened slowly as he passed, revealing a black pit inside, perfectly round, lined with tiny teeth.

He looked away.

The rabbit turned its head slightly. “It’s just curious,” it said.

“Why does everything look like it’s watching me?”

“Because it is,” said the owl, gliding silently above. “You’re very new.”

They came to a wide clearing where the path split again, but this time it wasn’t two or three forks — it was dozens. Narrow little trails, curling in every direction, vanishing into mist, overgrown vines, staircases that went sideways, bridges that led into walls. Each one was marked with a single object sitting at its mouth.

A boot.

A crown.

A broken mirror.

A single glove.

A lantern lit with blue flame.

A clock with no hands.

Robbin turned slowly in place. “What is this?”

The rabbit sat beside him, ears twitching. “Choices.”

“Do I have to pick one?”

“You always do,” the owl said.

“But I don’t know where they go.”

“Neither do they,” the rabbit answered.

Robbin hesitated. His eyes fell on the glove — it looked familiar somehow. Small, like it would fit him. Pale green. A tiny stitch coming undone at the wrist.

He reached toward it.

It didn’t move.

He stepped closer.

The glove lifted gently from the ground, hovering just before him. Then, with a small flicker of wind that didn’t touch anything else, it drifted slowly toward one of the narrowest paths — barely more than a line through tall moss.

“That one,” said the rabbit.

“If you trust the glove,” added the owl.

“I don’t know,” Robbin said softly. “I don’t know what I trust.”

And yet — he followed.

As the glove floated ahead of him into the moss, the other paths behind them began to crumble. The boot withered. The crown turned to dust. The blue flame blinked out.

He looked back once.

But the way was gone.

And ahead, somewhere deep within the tall moss, a soft sound began — like laughter underwater, or a child learning to hum.

The moss parted as the glove passed, not bending but pulling aside, thread by thread, revealing a narrow passage barely wide enough for Robbin's shoulders. The light dimmed to a quiet green. Everything smelled of wet cloth and rusted metal. He moved carefully, placing each foot where the glove had drifted just before.

The rabbit stayed close behind now. Its breathing was louder in the tight space — small, steady huffs, as if it disliked the closeness of things pressing in. The owl flew somewhere above, its wings brushing occasionally against branches Robbin couldn't see.

As they walked, the moss began to shift color — at first softly, then more clearly, turning from green to dark violet, then to gray, then to white. Strange shapes started appearing in it — symbols made of roots, twisting in spirals or drawn like crooked arrows pointing downward.

Then came the doors.

Not one door — many. Lining the sides of the moss path like forgotten paintings. Each was different. One was made of cracked bone, tied together with faded ribbon. Another looked like it had been carved from a single piece of red glass, glowing faintly as if something behind it was moving. One door was nothing but a black rectangle in the air, no handle, no hinges — just shadow.

The glove passed them all without pause.

Robbin dared a whisper. "What are they?"

"Places," said the rabbit.

"Memories," said the owl.

"Both," the rabbit added. "Or neither. Some open. Some wait. Some never remember why they were built."

They kept walking.

The path narrowed again. The glove paused, hovering before a final door. It was small — smaller than Robbin — and covered in blue moss so thick it looked like fur. In its center was a circle of brass with a single word carved into it.

He stepped closer, brushing the moss away.

The word was *HOME*.

Robbin stared at it.

The glove stopped moving. It hovered in place. Waiting.

Behind him, the rabbit didn't speak. Neither did the owl.

His hand trembled slightly as he reached toward the door. Then stopped.

"I don't think it means my home," he said quietly.

"No," said the owl.

"It means *a* home," said the rabbit.

"Whose?"

"That depends who opens it."

Robbin looked at the handle. It was shaped like a bell.

He stepped back.

"No," he whispered.

The glove flickered, then turned, and floated down a hidden stair to the right — a stair that hadn't been there a moment before.

Robbin followed.

The moss closed behind them like curtains pulled by invisible hands.

And far away, one of the forgotten doors began to knock — gently, rhythmically — with no one standing near it.

The stair beneath the moss was not stone or wood — it was woven. Fibers twisted into steps, soft but firm, stretching downward in a spiral that had no center. Each step gave slightly under Robbin's weight, then rose again after he passed. The glove floated ahead of him like a moth drawn by a sound too soft to hear. No walls, no ceiling — only mist drifting close, like breath from a sleeping animal.

The rabbit had stopped speaking. The owl said nothing. Their presence felt smaller now, as if the stair had thinned them out. Robbin's thoughts began to slow, his memories tugged at odd angles. He blinked, and for a moment saw himself walking above — in the real woods, younger somehow, chasing a pinecone through sunlight.

Then it was gone.

The stair finally ended. Not with a room, but with a sky.

Or something that looked like sky — enormous, rippling, held above them by nothing at all. Pale violet with streaks of white that moved like rivers. Beneath it stretched a field of long, colorless grass. Each blade shimmered faintly as they brushed through it. No trees. No stones. Only tall grass, swaying without wind, humming without tune.

The glove sank to the ground and vanished.

Robbin stared at the empty space where it had been.

“Now what?” he asked.

The rabbit sniffed the air. “We’re being followed.”

Robbin turned sharply. “Who?”

“Not a who,” said the owl. “A *thing*.”

He listened.

Far off, beneath the humming, another sound moved through the grass — something heavy, dragging, slow. It didn’t grow louder. It didn’t try to hide. It moved steadily, patiently, without breath or footstep.

The rabbit’s ears twitched.

“We’re not welcome here,” it said.

“But you brought me,” Robbin whispered.

“We bring,” said the owl. “We don’t *belong*.”

A shape appeared in the distance.

Robbin squinted. It was not walking. It was taller than a man. Thin like a nail. Black like ink dropped in milk. It had no face. But it turned toward them.

Robbin’s knees felt strange.

“What is it?” he asked.

The rabbit was still.

“Something that forgot how to dream.”

They began to run.

The grass parted in silence.

And behind them, the thing moved without sound, gaining slowly, as if it didn’t need to hurry — as if it had followed them through every door and stair and garden already.

Robbin ran without knowing where his feet landed. The grass blurred past his legs, brushing his arms and cheeks with cold strands that sang as he passed — high, thin notes, like glass breaking in slow motion. The sky above pulsed once, violet rippling to deep gray, and the shape behind them kept moving. It did not run. It drifted — fast as a falling star and just as silent.

The rabbit darted ahead, low to the ground, ears pinned back, eyes wide but dry. “Don’t stop,” it called.

The owl swooped low, circling once over Robbin’s head. “Don’t *look back*.”

But of course, Robbin looked.

He turned just slightly, just for a moment — and saw it clearer.

The thing had no eyes. No limbs. No mouth. And yet it stared. And yet it reached. And yet it hungered. It was made of forgetting. It was the shape of *leaving something behind forever.*

He stumbled. The ground dipped.

Then suddenly — no more grass. The field ended.

They stood at the edge of a great hollow — a bowl in the earth, sunk and wide, filled not with water but fog. At the center of the bowl stood a tree.

The tree was enormous and pale. Its branches reached out in flat, perfect rings, each one layered above the next like ribs or shelves or roads in the sky. No leaves. No bark. The tree glowed faintly with a silver-white light, and hanging from its lowest branches were dozens of objects: cages made of glass, keys the size of shovels, lanterns that burned without fire, ropes that tied themselves into knots.

The rabbit stopped at the edge.

“This is as far as I go,” it said.

Robbin gasped for breath, bent double, staring at the fog below.

“You said you were guiding me,” he said.

“I was. This part is yours.”

“What is that thing? Why is it chasing us?”

The owl landed beside him, folding its wings. “It isn’t chasing *us*.”

Robbin looked up. “Then what?”

“It’s following *you*,” the rabbit said. “It only comes for those who don’t belong.”

Robbin’s hands were shaking.

“I don’t understand anything,” he whispered.

The owl touched his shoulder lightly with one wing. “Then climb the tree,” it said. “The tree remembers.”

Behind them, the shape reached the edge of the field.

Robbin turned, heart pounding, and stepped into the fog.

The rabbit watched from above.

The owl took flight.

And the boy vanished beneath the silver limbs.

The fog closed around him like a whisper pulled into cloth. It wasn’t thick, exactly — he could still see his feet, the faint shimmer of the earth below, and the pale shimmer of the great tree rising ahead. But everything else felt far away, folded behind curtains he couldn’t lift. Even his own thoughts seemed quieter here, like they were being heard by something else before he could think them.

He stepped carefully toward the tree.

Its roots were huge, spreading out like roads in all directions. Some sank into the fog, others curved upward, forming arches and small steps. The bark was smooth, cold to the touch, and when Robbin pressed his hand against it, he felt something thrum beneath — not a heartbeat, but close. Like the murmur of names remembered by something too old to speak.

He climbed.

The first branch bent down to meet him, forming a perfect step. As he stepped onto it, the fog below fell away entirely, leaving only open space beneath. The tree rose through silence, its limbs steady and strange. On the second branch, he passed a cage made of what looked like frozen smoke. Inside it, something stirred — slowly, carefully, as if waking from a thousand-year sleep. It did not look at him.

On the third branch, he passed a bell. It hung from a thread of shadow and swung gently as he walked by, though there was no wind. It made no sound. Not even silence. Just a pause.

He kept climbing.

Each branch higher was stranger than the last. Some split into staircases, others coiled like shells. One grew flowers made of mirrors — and each mirror showed a different version of his face: older, younger, sleeping, laughing, terrified. He looked away.

Finally, he reached a platform near the crown — flat, circular, made from a branch that had grown wide like a disc. At its center stood a door.

It was not attached to anything.

Just a door, standing upright, made of dark glass.

It had no handle. No keyhole.

Just a small white note pinned to its center.

Robbin stepped closer and read the note.

It said: “Only what you carry may pass.”

He looked down at himself. His clothes were torn at the sleeves. His shoes soaked through. His hands still faintly stained with berry juice. In his left pocket, something moved.

He reached in and pulled it out.

A pinecone.

One of the knights from his game. Cracked now, with a bit of moss stuck to it.

He held it in his palm and looked at the door again.

The glass shimmered.

Behind him, somewhere below, the thing in the fog made no sound — but he felt it growing closer, stretching toward the roots of the tree like a shadow that had never stopped falling.

Robbin stepped forward.

He pressed the pinecone to the door.

It opened.

And there was only light.

The light didn’t blind him. It welcomed him. Not warm, not cold — simply *right*. Like stepping into the center of a forgotten memory, not one he had lost, but one that had never belonged to him in the first place. The glass door vanished behind him without sound. The pinecone was no longer in his hand. His fingers were empty and still.

He stood on a bridge of woven shadow stretched across a sky made entirely of moving color — not clouds, not light, something stranger. Below him was nothing. Above him, the sky pulsed and curled like ink in water.

Ahead, the bridge led to a single platform — floating, turning gently, with a shape sitting at its center.

As he walked, the bridge didn’t sway. It *listened*. With each step, something deep beneath its threads hummed softly, echoing the sound of his breath.

When he reached the platform, he saw what sat there.

A mirror.

Tall, old, cracked at the corners. Wrapped in vines of copper and stitched with small bones — mouse bones, bird bones, bones he couldn't name. The surface was dark, but not from dust. It was dark like a deep lake, still and waiting.

He stepped closer.

The mirror did not show him.

It showed a room.

A quiet room with a wooden bed, and a boy asleep in it. A ribbon tied to his wrist.

The boy did not move.

Robbin pressed his hand to the glass.

Nothing happened.

"Is that me?" he asked the silence.

The mirror did not answer.

But the platform shifted. Just a little. And the mirror's surface began to ripple.

This time, the image changed.

Not a bed.

A table.

Three figures around it: the rabbit, the owl, and someone else — thin, tall, masked in blue. They were speaking, but no sound came through.

The rabbit pointed upward. The owl tilted its head. The masked one held something in both hands — something wrapped in black cloth.

Then it turned.

And looked at Robbin through the mirror.

It raised one hand.

And knocked.

Three times.

The glass rang like a bell.

Then the image vanished.

And Robbin was alone on the platform again, with only the mirror, now silent, holding no reflection at all.

Behind him, the bridge had unraveled.

There was no way back.

Only forward — into the sky of color that had begun to open, like a mouth full of stories that had never been told.

The platform began to drift. Not fast, not slow — just steadily forward, as if pulled by a tide that had no sea. Robbin stood still, hands at his sides, staring into the sky that widened before him. It had changed again. The colors no longer floated like ink — they turned like wheels, slow spirals of pale gold, green, and a blue so deep it hummed.

Shapes moved within them — not solid, not quite alive. Suggestions of wings, of towers, of clocks unwinding.

The mirror behind him dimmed until it was only a frame. The vines retreated. The bones fell away one by one, dissolving into motes of ash. Then it, too, was gone.

In the distance, a sound began. Like footsteps on paper.

A figure was walking toward him across the air.

It was tall and dressed in a coat stitched from pages — hundreds of pages, each one with a name written across it in different handwritings. The figure had no face, only a mask made of glass with fog trapped inside.

In its right hand it held a lantern with no flame. In its left, a small silver bell on a thread.

It stopped a few steps away from Robbin and tilted its head.

“You’ve come further than most,” it said. Its voice was soft, but it echoed with a strange delay, like it was remembering what it had just said.

“I didn’t mean to,” Robbin replied.

“No one does,” the figure said. “But still. Here you are.”

“What is this place?”

The figure paused.

“It has no name. Things that change too often forget what they were called.”

Robbin looked down — but there was no down anymore. Only a shifting, slow swirl of color, memory, and time.

“I think something is following me,” he said.

“Yes,” said the figure. “But not here.”

“Why?”

“Because even forgetting has limits.”

The figure stepped closer. The pages of its coat rustled, and one fluttered loose. Robbin caught it as it floated down.

On it was his name.

And a date.

A date that hadn’t happened yet.

He looked up, mouth open.

But the figure was already raising the silver bell.

And when it rang — gently, clearly — the sky split into three paths.

One of roots.
One of stairs.
One of mirrors.

“You may choose,” the figure said.

“But only once.”

Robbin looked at each path.

Then he closed his eyes.

And stepped.

The path he chose was not the one with roots, nor stairs, nor mirrors. Not exactly. It was a little of each — twisted like roots, descending like stairs, yet with the feeling of stepping through himself as if made of glass. The moment his foot touched it, the other paths vanished, curling inward like burned paper, and the figure in the coat of pages bowed once before dissolving into a drift of loose names.

Robbin didn’t look back.

The path beneath him bent downward in a wide spiral, leading into a space lit by neither sun nor stars. It was dim, but not dark — lit by glowworms that hung from invisible ceilings, pulsing like thoughts too quiet to finish. The walls of the path were stitched with shelves, and on each shelf sat jars.

Some were small, no larger than a fingernail. Others as wide as his chest. All were sealed.

He paused beside one. The glass was thick and greenish. Inside floated a little toy boat — no water, just air. The boat turned slowly, endlessly, as if dreaming of an ocean it had never seen.

He passed another jar. Inside: a key and a feather tied together with red thread.

Another: a child's voice, whispering something over and over in a language he didn't speak. It wasn't frightening, but it was very sad.

He moved faster after that.

The path opened into a chamber that seemed to breathe. Walls like cloth — pale and heavy, pulsing in and out as if the whole space were asleep. In the middle stood a table. Around it, seven chairs. Six were occupied.

One by a fox with silver eyes and hands instead of paws. One by a woman made entirely of shadow stitched with pins. One by a man whose head was a spinning compass. One by a tall, glass-skinned creature with a candle burning inside its chest. One by a child who had no face. One by the owl.

The seventh chair was empty.

They looked at Robbin without moving.

The owl spoke first. "You stepped where you could have turned."

"And now you must sit," said the compass-headed man.

Robbin approached the table slowly. The candlelight flickered within the glass creature's chest, casting long, bent shadows across the cloth walls.

He sat.

No one spoke.

The table in front of him changed.

One by one, small objects appeared: a ribbon, a pinecone, a crumpled page, a glove, a cracked mirror shard, a droplet of fog sealed in amber.

"These are your echoes," said the shadow-woman, voice like wind through paper.

"They are what you left behind," said the fox.

Robbin reached toward the pinecone.

"Careful," warned the owl. "Each one will speak if touched. But not all truths are useful."

He hesitated.

Then reached for the mirror shard.

It felt cold. Lighter than it should have been. And when he looked into it, he didn't see his face.

He saw a garden.

And a door.

And something waiting just behind it — not cruel, not kind, just waiting.

The mirror shard trembled, then cracked again, and vanished.

Robbin looked at the others.

And slowly, carefully, reached for the next.

He touched the glove.

It rose gently from the table and hovered above his hand, then uncurled — not as cloth, but as something living. Its fingers stretched and fluttered like leaves caught in a slow current. A faint green light bloomed inside it, pulsing once, twice, and then the glove became flat again, settling softly on his palm. Robbin saw, not with his eyes but somewhere behind them:

A hallway of moss.
A door that said *Home*.
His own small hand reaching, then stopping.
Not from fear, but choice.
The glove had led him — but he had not followed it all the way.

The vision faded. The glove dissolved into tiny spores that drifted upward and vanished.

The shadow-woman turned her faceless head toward him. "That was your first refusal."

"Not all paths should be taken," added the fox.

"Even those you carve yourself," murmured the glass man, flickering with inner flame.

Robbin looked down at the ribbon next. It was curled tightly, stained now — not yellow anymore, but the pale color of old light. When he touched it, it unfurled like breath.

Images flickered:
A laundry line.
A song with no words.
A voice calling his name — not in panic, but in habit. As if it had been calling for a long time.

"Your mother still hangs the sheets," said the owl quietly. "The ones you never saw dry."

The ribbon coiled into itself and disappeared.

One by one, he reached for the others.

The crumpled page whispered the words of a dream he had forgotten: something about a hallway that walked instead of him, something about hands growing from the floor. It smelled of libraries that had no windows.

The droplet of fog was colder than the mirror, and when he held it, his breath stilled. For a moment he saw a mountain of sleeping giants, their mouths filled with clocks. Then nothing.

The pinecone, last of all, did not vanish. It remained. Whole and silent.

Robbin looked at it.

“It’s the only thing you made yourself,” said the owl. “In play. Before any door.”

“Before any fear,” said the compass-headed man.

He picked it up and held it tightly in both hands.

The candlelight in the glass creature’s chest dimmed.

The cloth walls stilled.

The table was now empty.

The shadow-woman rose without sound. One by one, the others followed. No words. No steps. They simply left — dissolving into the folds of the chamber, or folding through seams that hadn’t been there before.

Only the owl remained.

It looked at Robbin.

“This path doesn’t end,” it said. “But the circle closes.”

Robbin nodded.

He held the pinecone close.

And the owl opened its wings. “Come.”

The chamber rippled.

And the table was no longer a table, but a raft.

And the light above them had become a river.

The raft drifted soundlessly along the river of light. No paddles. No wind. Just movement — slow and sure, like the tide of an unseen moon. Robbin sat cross-legged at its center, the pinecone cupped gently in his hands. The owl perched beside him, one eye on the water, one on the sky, which was no longer a sky but a dome of turning pages — books without titles, letters rearranging themselves as they floated by overhead.

The river was not made of water. It was made of memory — stretched into light, flowing forward. Sometimes the surface shimmered and showed faces. Sometimes whole places. Once, Robbin saw the field of tall grass, untouched now, and the figure of forgetting standing still at its center, turned away, as if it had never followed him at all.

He didn't ask where they were going.

He didn't need to.

The river knew.

Ahead, spires began to rise from the glow — black at first, then streaked with gold, bent and spiraled like horns of animals that had never lived. Between them: bridges made of sound. Tunnels shaped from song. A city built not from stone but from *meaning* — half-formed thoughts, unfinished dreams, fragments of things people imagined once and forgot before waking.

The owl's feathers stirred in the still air.

"You must enter alone," it said. "We don't follow past this place."

Robbin stood, his knees unsure beneath him. "What is it?"

"A city," the owl replied. "But not for living."

"For what then?"

The owl looked toward the towers.

"For *keeping*."

The raft brushed against a silver shore and stopped.

Robbin stepped off. The pinecone in his hand grew warmer.

At the edge of the shore stood a gate — made of mirrors facing inward, so no reflection showed. Symbols hung above it: a sleeping eye, a broken hourglass, a door with no handle.

The mirrors parted.

And the city of Lost Constructs opened its silence to him.

The city breathed without breath. It had no streets in the ordinary way — no cobbled paths or lantern posts — only corridors of light, spiraling alleys of sound, long arcades where shadows stood in rows and didn't move. Every building leaned slightly, as if listening. Every door was closed, yet none had locks.

Robbin stepped through the gate of mirrors and the pinecone in his hand gave a faint, almost invisible tremble.

To his left, a staircase twisted up the side of a structure shaped like a hand, each finger a tower, each knuckle a window. He saw no people, but felt watched. Not by eyes — by *intentions*. Dreams that had built themselves into walls. Hopes that had hardened into stone. This was not a place for the living, but for the pieces they leave behind.

At the base of a tree carved from blue crystal, a figure sat still. Not human. Thin as a reed, crowned in pages, holding nothing but a thread in its hand. The thread floated upward into the sky — and disappeared into a hole that moved with the clouds.

Robbin walked slowly past it.

On a wall ahead, words appeared as he approached. They arranged themselves like flowers opening at night:

"You have crossed the forest of forgetting."

"You have stepped through the garden of turning."

"Now you may leave something behind."

The pinecone was heavier now.

He looked down at it. It had changed. It was still a pinecone, but it breathed — softly, like a creature asleep in his palm. A green thread ran through its cracked scales, pulsing faintly.

He stepped closer to the wall.

A small niche opened. Inside it: a hollow shaped exactly like the thing he held.

The owl's words echoed: *"Only what you carry may pass."*

And now, the wall said: *"Only what you leave may remain."*

Robbin stood for a long time.

Then, gently, he placed the pinecone into the hollow.

It fit perfectly.

The wall closed.

The city exhaled — once — and the towers above bent a little farther inward, as if nodding.

A new gate opened before him. Not of mirrors now, but of woven branches and flickering symbols. Behind it, something warmer. Earth. Light. A smell like apples and rain.

The dream was closing.

And somewhere, very far above, the boy in the bed turned in his sleep.

The gate of branches swayed slightly in a wind that did not touch Robbin's hair. Its shape was simple — two wooden limbs tied with threads of green light, the same hue that had once glowed inside the pinecone. As he stepped forward, the city behind him began to dim — not fading away, but retreating, folding itself back into whatever space it had come from. The spires curled. The echoing corridors folded like paper. The page-crowned figure by the crystal tree let go of its thread at last, and vanished with it into the sky.

Robbin did not look back.

Beyond the gate, the light changed. The sky became more familiar — pale blue streaked with warm clouds. The walls around him turned to trees again, soft-limbed and moss-covered. The path underfoot returned to dirt, to pine needles, to the hush of wind through ordinary branches.

He was walking upward now. His legs were sore, but steady. The dream was lifting.

Birdsong. Somewhere far off, a stream.

No rabbit. No owl. No gates.

Only woods.

He paused at a curve in the path. A breeze passed through the trees — carrying the scent of damp bark, sun-warmed leaves, and something faint, something like his mother's kitchen when the window was open and the bread was cooling.

His hands were empty.

He stepped into the sunlight.

The trees opened. A hill rose ahead, and beyond it, the red roof of his house.

Robbin stood still for a moment. The world was quiet. Not waiting. Just *being*.

Then he began to walk.

Back toward the fence.
Back toward the laundry line.
Back toward the bed where, somewhere else, a boy had just begun to wake up.

And in the woods behind him, far below where light no longer reached, the city kept sleeping.

But in one wall, in one hidden chamber among the unspoken dreams, a pinecone pulsed once — soft and green — and then was still.

Part II

The kitchen window was open. The curtain moved slightly in the breeze, brushing the wooden sill like fingers tracing a thought. Robbin stepped through the back door, one foot, then the other, and stood still.

The house was quiet.

Not empty, not dark — just quiet in a way he didn't remember. The floor creaked under his foot. The air smelled the same — soap, bread, damp pine — but it sat heavy, like it had been waiting too long. The clock on the wall ticked. Slowly. Too slowly.

He called out. "Mama?"

No answer.

He moved through the room. Everything was in its place. The chipped mug by the sink. The basket with drying socks. The open book by the window, spine turned upward. He touched the edge of it. The page didn't move.

He climbed the stairs.

His room was as he'd left it — nearly. His shoes were under the bed. His blanket folded neatly. But something in the corner was off.

The pinecone.

It sat there, on the windowsill, exactly where he used to keep it before he'd taken it into the woods.

Except — he had left it. In the city. In the wall.

He stepped closer.

The pinecone was warm.

A thread of green glowed faintly between the scales.

He didn't touch it.

Outside, the trees shifted. He moved to the window and looked out across the field.

The hill was still there. The fence. The far treeline.

But between the tall grass, there was movement.

Not wind.

Figures.

Small ones. Not children. Not animals.

Moving quickly, low to the ground, like they knew the path better than he ever had.

Robbin leaned forward, breath quiet.

In the far corner of the field, near the tree where the owls sometimes perched, a light blinked once.

Blue, then gone.

And far behind it, something laughed. Not cruelly. Just strange.

The dream, he thought, didn't end.

It followed me home.

That night, he didn't sleep.

He lay in bed with the blanket pulled to his chest, eyes fixed on the square of moonlight creeping across the ceiling. The house made sounds — it always had — but now they leaned in toward his ears. Floorboards stretching, beams sighing, the soft tick of the clock downstairs. But under that, quieter still, he heard… scratching.

It came from the walls.

Not mice. Not claws.

It was as if someone were writing with a pencil just under the floorboards.

He held the pinecone.

He hadn't meant to. It was on the windowsill earlier. But when he climbed into bed, it was in his hand.

It pulsed, faintly.

At some hour too late to count, he slipped out from the covers and padded to the window. The air smelled like the dream again — soft moss, salt, something he couldn't name. The hill outside looked paler than usual. The trees had edged closer, he thought.

And on the far end of the garden, there was movement.

He leaned closer.

At first it was just shadows, shifting — the way wind makes tricks when the grass leans. But then, a figure stepped clear from the dark.

It was no taller than his knee.

Broad-shouldered, with a beard that reached the ground, carrying a pack that rattled faintly as it walked.

A dwarf.

Robbin didn’t breathe.

The figure moved to the edge of the garden, knelt, and began arranging small stones in a circle. Its hands worked quickly, surely, muttering words he couldn’t hear. Then it stood again and looked up.

Directly at Robbin’s window.

He stepped back.

When he dared to peer out again, the dwarf was gone.

But the circle of stones remained.

And beside it, nestled in the grass, was something that shimmered like metal left too long in moonlight.

At dawn, he slipped out the back door without breakfast.

The air was cold and wet against his ankles, the grass high from two days of rain. He didn’t tell anyone where he was going — didn’t need to. No one had spoken since he’d come home. His mother hadn’t asked where he’d been. She’d kissed his head the night before without looking him in the eye.

As he crossed the field, the wind changed.

It no longer smelled like home.

It smelled like somewhere older.

The stone circle was still there at the edge of the garden, half-sunk in dew. Seven small stones, pale gray, arranged so precisely that no one could have stumbled them together by accident. The grass around them was darker, pressed flat in a perfect ring.

Robbin crouched.

At the center of the circle lay the object he had seen from his window.

It was a coin.

But not like any coin he had ever touched. Heavy. Cold. Made of something too smooth for metal. Its surface shimmered faintly between silver and black, and there were symbols etched on both sides — not numbers, not letters, but curved marks, like a language written by moonlight.

He picked it up.

As soon as his fingers touched it, a sound filled the air — a low, humming chord, deep and brief, like the ringing of something enormous beneath the earth.

The grass leaned away from him.

The stone circle blinked once — just once — all seven stones glowing from within like coals being breathed on.

Then silence.

And behind him, at the treeline, a second figure appeared.

Tall. Thin. With ears that rose above its hair like leaves made of ice.

An elf.

Not smiling. Not moving.

Just watching.

Robbin stood very still, the coin held tight in his hand.

The elf raised one finger.

And pointed toward the woods.

The elf did not speak.

Its robes were so pale they shimmered like cobwebs in frost, and though it stood utterly still, the wind moved through the fabric as if it were part of the air itself. Its eyes were narrow and unreadable, not unfriendly — but vast, like they saw past Robbin, past the field, into something behind the sky.

The finger remained raised.

Not in command.

In invitation.

Robbin stepped over the stones.

He hesitated at the edge of the grass where the field gave way to wild underbrush. He looked back once — the kitchen window, the roof of the house, the chimney leaning slightly as it always had. He thought of his bed, the blanket, the pinecone still resting on the windowsill.

Then he stepped into the trees.

The forest light closed around him, dim and shifting, with branches knotted like hands reaching for each other in sleep. The elf turned without sound and moved ahead, its bare feet never quite touching the earth, leaving no mark. It didn’t speak, but the path cleared before it, as if the trees made space.

They passed a hollow stump where mushrooms glowed blue as candlelight.

They passed a fallen branch carved with a dozen runes that changed shape when Robbin blinked.

Then they came to a clearing.

At the center stood a door.

Just a door — no frame, no hinges, no house. It stood upright in the grass, built from twisted roots and silver thread. Across its top was carved a phrase in the same curving script as the coin.

The elf stopped beside it.

Turned to Robbin.

And opened its palm.

He understood.

He placed the coin into the elf's hand.

It vanished.

The door opened inward — into light that flickered not like fire, but like memory.

And from somewhere beyond it, laughter rose. Small voices. Quick footsteps. Bells sewn into sleeves.

The elf stepped aside. Its eyes did not follow Robbin through the doorway — it was no longer looking *at* him at all, but elsewhere, as if its purpose had already turned to mist. Robbin hesitated on the threshold. The door's frame trembled slightly in the light, the threads that held it stitched with faint sparks. What lay beyond was not forest, nor garden, nor dream the way he'd known it. It was something smaller. Stranger. Older.

He stepped through.

The light closed behind him.

Instantly the world shifted.

He stood in a tunnel, but not one made of rock. The walls curved like the inside of a living tree, bark spiraling in slow, looping knots. Everything shimmered slightly — not glowing, but reflecting things that weren't there. He saw hints of color passing through the knots, brief flickers: red ribbons, white wings, a hand too small to be human.

Laughter echoed ahead.

Not far.

Not near.

It sounded like bells learning to speak.

He walked slowly, his footfalls muffled by moss that hadn't been touched in years — or ever. The tunnel sloped downward, just enough to pull his steps forward without effort. The air grew warmer, full of smells he couldn't name. Honey and dust. Water and iron. Wildflowers and something stranger — like the memory of a scent rather than the scent itself.

He came to a curve.

Beyond it, light danced.

He turned the corner.

And stopped.

They were there — fairies.

Dozens, maybe hundreds, too many to count at once. Some as small as fireflies, others no bigger than Robbin's hand. Wings like leaves, or feathers, or sheets of flame. Their faces shimmered and shifted — one moment like children, the next like masks drawn in smoke. They darted through the air on currents that weren't there, weaving ribbons between branches, painting the air with songs that changed shape.

One noticed him.

Then another.

Soon they all slowed.

The air turned still.

And from among them, one descended — slightly larger than the others, wearing a crown of seeds and string.

It hovered just before Robbin, its eyes gleaming.

"You stepped through a door that never opens," it said, in a voice like broken windchimes rethreaded.

He didn't answer.

"You carry nothing," it added. "But still something follows you."

Robbin opened his mouth.

"I left it behind."

The fairy tilted its head.

“Then why is it here?”

And from deep within the walls of the tunnel, behind the bark and root, came the sound of something *knocking*.

Once.
Twice.
Three times.

Slow.

And waiting.

The fairies didn’t speak.

Not after the knocking.

They scattered upward like startled sparks, their wings blurring the air with threads of color that vanished too quickly to follow. Some darted into crevices in the bark-walls. Others flickered into folds of shadow and were gone. Within seconds, the great hollow where they had gathered stood empty.

All but for one.

The crowned one.

It hovered still, wings motionless now, hovering with no effort, its face unreadable — not cruel, not kind, simply older than questions.

Robbin waited for it to explain.

It didn’t.

The knock came again.

Not louder. Just nearer.

“Who is it?” Robbin asked.

The crowned fairy turned its head very slightly.

“That’s the wrong question.”

“Then what—?”

The fairy leaned closer, voice softer than breath. “*Ask what it’s knocking on.*”

Robbin looked at the walls. The bark. The shapes beneath the surface. There were veins there now, pulses running under the wood. The tunnel wasn’t just tree. It was deeper than tree.

It was hollow.

It was listening.

“Is it behind the wall?”

The fairy didn’t answer.

It rose again, slowly, drifting backward toward a high knot in the bark. As it passed, the knot curled open like an eye blinking. The fairy slipped through and vanished.

Robbin stood alone.

The light around him dimmed.

Then, without warning — the bark split.

Only a hairline fracture, across one curve of the tunnel. But from within it, something cold poured outward. Not air. Not shadow. Just *cold*, raw and slow like a breath drawn backward.

And a voice spoke.

It did not speak in words.

But Robbin understood:

“You opened the city. You left the piece. But you are not *done*.”

The bark crackled slightly.

A root uncurled from the wall and pointed forward, deeper into the tunnel.

And from far ahead, where no fairy light reached, came the sound of metal — hammers on stone, tools against iron, and the deep hum of work without end.

The root stayed pointing for only a moment, then withdrew, folding back into the wall like a finger pulled into a sleeve. The crack sealed behind it. The tunnel ahead darkened, but didn’t go blind — a faint glow rose from the floor now, soft and amber, like light sunk deep inside stone.

Robbin stepped forward.

The path narrowed. The bark beneath his feet turned rougher, harder, until it was no longer bark at all but rock, veined with glittering seams — not gold, not quite silver, something in between, shifting colors slightly when he moved his eyes. The air changed, too. Thicker. Sharper. Filled with the smell of soot and dust, but not unpleasant — the scent of things being shaped.

The sound grew clearer: the clang of metal on metal, rhythm without music, repetition without haste. The kind of work that had no beginning and no end.

He turned a bend.

And the tunnel opened into a hall.

Low-ceilinged, wide, built from stone stacked with obsessive care. The blocks had markings etched into their edges — runes, pictograms, and numbers. Some glowed faintly. Along the walls were benches covered in tools: chisels, hammers, vices, wires. Shelves held strange half-made things — pocket suns that blinked once and died, masks that looked like faces frozen in laughter, rings that spun in place even while lying still.

In the middle of the hall stood the dwarves.

Not like the ones in storybooks. These were not rosy-cheeked or jolly. They were thick-boned, silent, hunched over their benches. Their beards were braided not with ribbons but with copper wire and fine chain. Their clothing was leather, thick and soot-dark, patched with burn marks. Their hands — wide, calloused, stained with ash — moved with precision.

None of them looked up.

Not at first.

Then one stopped working.

Turned.

And stared directly at Robbin.

Its eyes were not angry, not even curious — they were tired, old beyond mountains, but burning steady beneath heavy brows.

It lifted a hand.

And Robbin noticed, hanging from a hook on the wall behind the dwarf, a thing he knew.

His ribbon.

The yellow one.

Still tied, still creased as if it had been taken from his wrist only hours before.

He stepped closer.

The dwarf raised a finger — not in warning, but in acknowledgement.

Then pointed to the ribbon.

Then to the forge.

Robbin felt a weight press gently into his chest.

Something was about to be made.

And he was part of it.

The forge breathed.

It sat at the far end of the stone hall — not roaring, not blazing, but steady. Its fire was not orange, not red. It burned in colors Robbin had no names for. Some of the flames moved sideways. Some didn't move at all, only hovered like a thought waiting to be spoken. Above it, the chimney curled upward into darkness, but no smoke rose. The air was clean. Dense. Charged.

The dwarf who had pointed now walked toward the ribbon.

He removed it from the hook without ceremony and brought it back to the forge, laying it gently on a flat slab of black stone. The others did not pause their work, but Robbin noticed their rhythm changed — slightly. Their hammers struck in a new pattern, slower, more deliberate. A kind of signal.

The dwarf glanced at Robbin again. "Name?"

His voice was low, thick, like something cracked underfoot.

"Robbin," he said.

The dwarf nodded once.

He picked up a rod from beside the forge and held it above the ribbon. The rod pulsed — not hot, not cold — and when it touched the yellow cloth, the ribbon stiffened.

It didn't burn.

It *changed.*

Its color deepened, brightened, then faded again. Threads pulled from it, floated, twisted into patterns in the air. They wove themselves into a new shape above the stone — something small and curling, like a crest or a seal, though Robbin couldn't see it clearly.

The dwarf grunted.

Another brought over a small object — a disc the size of a coin, smooth and blank.

The ribbon threads drifted downward into the disc like mist into stone.

And then the dwarf handed it to Robbin.

He took it carefully.

It was light.

Still warm.

The yellow of the ribbon had vanished — but its feel was there, faint, like warmth from a remembered hand.

“What is it?” he asked.

The dwarf wiped his palms on his apron. “What you lost. Made solid.”

“Is it magic?”

The dwarf looked at him.

“No,” he said. “It’s *yours*.”

Behind them, a hammer dropped. A dwarf leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. A soft vibration passed through the floor, through the benches, through Robbin’s bones.

Then came a voice.

But not from the dwarves.

It spoke through the forge.

Through the walls.

Through the disc in his hand.

“You are not the only one carrying.”

The flames bent.

The tunnel behind him breathed inward.

And something began to follow.

Not a thing made of forgetting this time.

Something older.

Something from *before*.

Robbin turned toward the tunnel.

Nothing was there — not visibly. But the breath had changed. The stone didn’t cool, didn’t crack — it listened. The hall, once so full of rhythm and tools and clang, fell still. Even the dwarves, who minutes before had worked without glance or pause, now looked toward the forge, then toward him, then toward the path beyond.

The dwarf who had crafted the disc crossed his arms.

“It doesn’t speak to us,” he said.

Another dwarf added, “Not anymore.”

Robbin’s fingers tightened around the disc. It felt heavier now — not by weight, but by *presence*, like holding a word not meant to be said aloud. He slipped it into his pocket.

“What is it?” he asked.

The oldest of the dwarves, one with a beard that touched the floor and hands inked with lines like maps, stepped forward. His voice came slow, as though pulled from under centuries.

“There are things beneath dreams,” he said. “Deep roots. Older than names. Most don’t go far enough to stir them.”

Robbin didn’t speak.

The old dwarf pointed at him — not with anger, not accusation, but quiet knowledge.

“But *you* have. Something followed you into the city. It watched when you left the pinecone. And it was not forgetting. That was only its shadow.”

He stepped aside and gestured toward the far end of the hall.

There, behind a thick stone arch, another passage led downward — deeper still, its mouth shaped like a jaw in the rock.

“You don’t have to go,” the old dwarf said.

“But it’s waiting,” Robbin said.

None of them nodded. None agreed. But they knew.

He walked toward the arch.

One dwarf placed a torch in his hand. Not fire — it glowed with a cold blue-green light, steady and silent.

As he passed under the arch, the stone changed. The carvings were older here. No symbols. Only marks — clawed, scratched, worn by hands that no longer had form.

And behind him, as the tunnel closed out the light of the forge, he heard one last word, spoken low and slow:

“Be careful what you *remember*.”

The path tilted forward.

The light dimmed.

And something began breathing in the dark, waiting not to be seen — but to be *known*.

The tunnel narrowed as he descended. Not in space — in sense. The air pressed closer. The torch in his hand burned cold and clear, casting little shadows but revealing every surface with unsettling honesty. The walls here were not smooth. They bent inward, pulsing faintly beneath cracked stone like lungs far below the earth. Roots pushed through in places — thick and black, veined with veins of silver.

He stepped over one. It twitched.

The air smelled of rain that hadn't fallen yet.

Far off — ahead or below, he couldn't say — came the soft scrape of something being pulled across stone. Not fast. Not hidden. Just patient.

He kept walking.

The tunnel turned left, then right, then stopped pretending to be a tunnel at all. It opened into a space too wide to see the edges. The light of his torch could only show so much — a floor, scattered stones, bones in the shape of things that once had names. A faint mist curled near the ground, low and slow, like breath.

And across from him — across the empty dark — stood a door.

It was taller than a house. Made of black wood, if it was wood at all. No frame. No hinges. Just there. Its surface was carved not with images or symbols, but with patterns that hurt the eye to follow — curves that bent inward into themselves, spirals that led nowhere. Something behind it moved.

Not footsteps.

Not breathing.

Just *presence*.

The torch flickered.

In his pocket, the disc began to warm.

Then it *spoke* — not with words, but with feeling. A pull behind the ribs. A memory not yet lived.

And suddenly he knew:

This door was not locked.

It had never been locked.

It had only been waiting for someone to *remember* it existed.

His feet felt cold.

His hand shook slightly as he reached for the disc.

He stepped forward.

The door breathed in.

And opened.

The door opened without sound. No creak, no groan. It didn't swing — it *unfolded*, like something being revealed rather than moved. A smell drifted out, older than earth, colder than stone. It wasn't decay. It was memory, deep and dry, stripped of warmth. The scent of something remembered too long.

Beyond the door was a chamber.

Circular. Vast. The ceiling high and lost in shadows. The floor was smooth and dark, covered in thin lines that pulsed when he stepped over them — not symbols, but *paths*, like veins in a forgotten body. The lines glowed dimly, recognizing his weight, his breath, or perhaps the disc in his pocket.

He took one more step inside.

The door folded shut behind him.

Nothing moved.

Then, from the center of the room, something rose.

Slowly. Not with effort, but *deliberation*. As though the act of rising had meaning beyond motion.

It had no name.

He saw it — and yet couldn't hold its shape. It was tall. Then small. Then too wide. Then narrow again. It shimmered, not with color, but with contradiction. A figure built from opposites: light that cast no shadow, arms that held no form, a head where memories slipped.

But its *eyes* remained constant.

Two deep wells, full of the kind of silence that could erase sound.

"You brought it," it said.

The voice did not echo. It arrived.

Robbin said nothing.

"Not the pinecone," it continued. "Not the ribbon. Not the object. The *crack*."

"What do you mean?"

"The place you left behind when you left yourself."

Robbin swallowed. The disc in his pocket grew warm again.

The creature stepped forward — or rather, the space between them shortened.

"Even dreams have doors," it said. "But what you opened wasn't a door."

Robbin took the disc from his pocket. Held it up.

The figure looked. And for a moment — just a breath — it recoiled.

A ripple passed through the chamber floor. The lines blinked. The shadows curled in like smoke held in a bowl.

Then it straightened again.

“You’re not ready,” it said.

“I came anyway,” Robbin answered.

The eyes flared.

The lines on the floor rose — lifted into the air like threads. They began to wind together, twisting into a shape.

A key.

Not metal. Not wood. Made of time and thread and dream.

The figure extended its hand — palm not open, but *empty*.

“Take it,” it said.

“What does it open?”

“Not a door.”

The key hovered between them.

“It opens *you*.”

The key hung in the air.

It turned slowly, without touch or tether, casting no shadow. Its shape wasn’t fixed — it changed as he watched. Sometimes sharp like a thorn, sometimes smooth as bone. At one moment it had teeth like a clock. Then, like a feather. Then, like something carved from silence.

Robbin didn’t reach for it.

Not yet.

“What happens if I take it?” he asked.

The figure did not blink. Did not shift. Just waited.

“You’ve already begun,” it said. “The moment you noticed the path was yours. This only shows you how far you’ve gone.”

Robbin looked down at the disc in his hand.

Its surface had changed.

No longer smooth.

Now carved.

With the same lines from the chamber floor — patterns that moved when he didn't watch them directly. The disc was no longer warm. It was *aware*. Like it had stopped pretending to be an object.

He reached for the key.

The moment his fingers touched it, everything stopped.

No sound. No breath. Even his own body froze — not from fear, not from pain, but from *recognition*. The key dissolved into his palm, not melting, not vanishing, but *joining* — as if it had always been there, waiting to be reclaimed.

And then the figure spoke again.

"Now you may return. But not by the path you came."

Robbin looked around. The walls of the chamber had shifted — no longer smooth and dark, but lined with roots, small doors, reflections he couldn't remember making.

He stepped back. The floor opened beneath him. Not a hole — a space. A movement.

And he fell. But not fast. Not downward. He fell through a page.

Through memory. Through something shaped like music.

And when the motion stopped, he was standing. In a clearing. Not the forest. Not the field.

But a place of starlight frozen in branches, of wind that hummed in forgotten languages. Stones stood in rings. Tiny lights floated like seeds.

And ahead of him, waiting on a crooked throne of woven ash and thread, was a figure he had not seen before.

Neither dwarf, nor elf, nor fairy. But something *older*.

Its face was made of masks. And in its hands, it held a letter. Folded. Sealed. With his name on it.

The figure did not move.

It sat perfectly still on the throne, which was not a seat in the human sense — it bent with the forest, grew from it, like a tree that had chosen to hold something instead of reach upward. Vines curled around its arms. Threads of gold and grey drifted from its shoulders. The masks

on its face shifted slowly, one fading into another — a child, a deer, a laughing mouth, a cracked mirror — never settling.

Robbin stepped closer.

The letter pulsed faintly, as if aware of him. Its seal was deep green, shaped like the leaf of a tree he didn't know. Beneath the seal, his name was written plainly.

Not in the strange scripts of the dwarves or elves.

But in his mother's handwriting. He reached for it.

The figure extended both hands.

The letter passed into Robbin's fingers like something being returned, not given. He held it.

And the masks stopped moving. The wind stopped too. The floating seeds hung in the air without drift.

He broke the seal. Inside was no message. Only a single pressed petal. Yellow.

And beneath it, a strand of thread — fine, near invisible, yet strong in his fingers.

He looked up. The masked figure had vanished. So had the throne.

He stood alone in the clearing now, with starlight fixed above him and the strange petal in his hand.

The thread quivered. Then pulled gently. He let it lead him.

Through the trees, whose leaves didn't rustle.

Past stones that hummed. Across a stream that didn't move. Until he saw a door again.

The third door since the forest began. But this one wasn't made of mirror, or root, or memory. This door was wood. Old, familiar. The same door from his house. But standing in the middle of the forest floor.

Closed.

And from the other side, he heard breathing. Not his own. Not his mother's. But someone he had not yet met. Someone who, somehow, *already knew him*.

Robbin stared at the door standing in the woods. It had no hinges, no frame, and yet it stood upright and steady, as if the ground had grown around it long ago. The grain of the wood was familiar — not just in texture or shape, but in *feeling*. He had seen this door since before he could remember. In his house. In drawings. Maybe even in dreams before the dream had started.

The thread in his hand was still warm.

It pulled softly, guiding his fingers toward the door's handle. There was nothing magical about it. No carvings, no keyhole. Just a plain, brass handle, dulled by time and the memory of hands. As he touched it, the petal tucked inside the letter gave off a faint scent — dry, faintly sweet, almost forgotten.

He turned the handle.

The door opened inward, slowly, without a sound. Behind it was not the inside of his house, nor the roots of the forest, nor another hall full of symbols and riddles. It was a room. Small. Round. Wooden. There was no furniture except for a chair and a table, and on the table, a box.

A simple wooden box, no larger than a bread loaf, its lid carved with shallow lines like cracks in dried earth.

Someone was already there. A boy.

He was sitting on the chair, elbows on the table, head turned toward Robbin, watching.

Not smiling. Not afraid. The boy looked just like Robbin. But older. Not by years. By experience.

His eyes had seen something Robbin had not yet reached. Not suffering — not yet — but depth, as if he'd stepped further into the world and forgotten how far.

The older Robbin didn't speak.

He gestured toward the box.

Robbin stepped into the room, and the door shut behind him, though he hadn't touched it.

The box waited between them.

"What is it?" Robbin asked.

The other him didn't answer with words. He placed his hand flat on the lid and tapped it once with his fingers, slow and deliberate, like a rhythm being passed between them.

Robbin stepped closer and placed his own hand beside the other's.

The lid lifted.

Not upward — outward. As if it peeled itself open.

Inside, there was no object.

Only a pool of dark, clear water, smooth as glass. It didn't reflect the ceiling. It reflected *moments* — images flowing beneath the surface, as if he were looking down into time itself.

He saw his own hands weaving grass into circles.

He saw the dwarf handing him the disc. He saw the fairies scattering in fear. He saw the pinecone pulsing in the wall of the city.

And deeper still — a shape. A face not his own. Something rising from a place he had not reached. A figure with no form, but presence enough to turn all the images around it pale.

The older Robbin removed his hand.

“You’re still early,” he said.

His voice was dry but calm, as though he’d waited a long time to say it.

“I don’t understand,” Robbin said.

“You will. But not now. This isn’t the end. Just another room in the house.”

Outside the window — a small, round pane of glass set in the curve of the wall — the forest moved again. This time, different. Brighter. The wind had returned.

“You have to leave this place before it keeps you,” the older Robbin said. “But you’ll return. When the time matches the path.”

The box closed. The light changed. And the room folded like paper. Not into blackness. Into *motion*.

Robbin didn’t fall. He was *carried* — as if the room had turned into a coat and he was being slipped into a sleeve.

Then silence. Then grass. Then sky. He sat up in a field. And far off, at the edge of the trees, someone was whistling.

The whistle came in a looping phrase, cheerful and slow, not meant for anyone in particular. Robbin stood. The grass where he lay was thick and warm, pressed flat in the shape of his body. Around him the field stretched toward a tree line that looked oddly familiar — the shape of the hills, the dip in the land — it all belonged to the surface world, but tilted slightly, as if re-drawn from memory.

He brushed his hands on his knees.

The whistle rose again.

This time he saw its source.

The rabbit was sitting on a rock, one leg crossed, ears curled like vines left in the sun too long. It looked up as Robbin approached but didn’t stop the tune until the last note slipped away.

“You’ve taken your time,” the rabbit said. “We thought you’d forgotten us.”

The owl stood beside it, perched on the lowest branch of a crooked tree, feathers ruffled as if from long travel.

“I didn’t forget,” Robbin said.

The rabbit sniffed, turning a pine needle in its paw. “Some do.”

“You remembered just enough,” the owl added.

Robbin looked behind him. The sky had begun to fold again — not darkening, not storming, just folding, like a blanket being slowly drawn inward from its edges. He couldn’t see the room with the box, or the strange wooden door, or the figure with masks. But something in the light reminded him of their shape.

“Is it ending?” he asked.

“No,” said the owl. “But you are.”

“Not in a bad way,” the rabbit said, quickly. “More like... when a tune ends, and the silence that comes after knows the song better than you did while it was playing.”

The owl took off, circling once.

“We’ll guide you back,” it said.

Robbin followed them across the field. The grass shifted beneath his feet — not like wind through blades, but like pages turning under a dream. With every step, the world around him changed. The trees grew closer. The light thickened.

Soon they reached the place where the stone teeth of the underground began.

Roots twisted like stair rails down into the dark.

Robbin looked once more at the thread in his hand.

It was beginning to fade — not fray, not break. Just fade, like the echo of a name.

He held it anyway.

And followed the rabbit and owl back into the passage.

The passage accepted them without sound.

Robbin stepped into the tunnel, and the moss underfoot curled gently around his shoes, brushing his heels like a farewell he didn’t yet deserve. The owl led from above, hopping silently between roots that hung from the ceiling like long, crooked fingers. The rabbit moved ahead on the path, stopping only to turn back and wait whenever Robbin fell too far behind.

No one spoke.

They passed again the twisted stone where fairies had once lit the air with drifting lights. It was quiet now. The bark on the walls had stilled, and the veins that once pulsed beneath it had faded into smooth, grey ridges. The roots no longer whispered. The knots in the wood no longer blinked.

Yet it wasn't empty.

There was something in the quiet that felt full — like a book closed gently, not shut in haste.

The dwarves' forge was far behind them now, and the carved floors of the dream-city had vanished. What remained was a tunnel Robbin recognized not from memory but from feeling. The same shape he'd descended with curiosity, now risen through with weight. He felt taller. Not in body, but inside.

A crack in the ceiling above let in a shard of forest light — pale and golden, trembling slightly, as if the sky hadn't decided what time it was.

"You're near the top," the owl said.

The rabbit paused beside a curled vine and pressed its nose against it. The vine unfurled into a staircase of leaves, dry but strong enough to step on.

"This is where we leave you," it said, not quite looking at him.

Robbin blinked. "You're not coming up?"

"We don't live in the bright part," the rabbit answered. "Our place is down here, where things are shaped and stories haven't hardened yet."

The owl nodded. "If you remembered us in the world above, we'd forget ourselves."

Robbin looked from one to the other.

"I don't want to forget," he said.

"You won't," said the rabbit. "Not the right things."

"And not all at once," added the owl. "Some dreams stay."

The light above deepened.

It spilled down the tunnel now in a long stripe, warm on his arm.

"Go," said the rabbit. "Before the opening closes. The world doesn't wait just because you know where you've been."

Robbin climbed the stairs of vine, hand to the wall, breath quiet.

Behind him, the passage began to fade.

The sound of the owl's wings softened.

The rabbit's voice hummed one last time — not words, just sound, the same whistle from before, stretched thin as thread.

Then he stepped up into the light.

The forest met him with silence.

Not an empty silence, but one of stillness, as though the trees had been holding their breath and now exhaled slowly. Light filtered through the canopy in quiet bands, dust turning in the air. The world above was unchanged — no broken branches, no trace of the doorway. Just pine needles, ferns, and the hush of late afternoon.

Robbin stood on the forest floor, blinking.

For a moment, he thought he'd only dreamt the whole thing. That he had wandered, fallen asleep, and imagined the tunnel, the city, the fairies, the dwarf with the coin, the door in the field. But his hand closed around something.

The disc was still in his pocket.

Not warm now, but real.

He let out a slow breath.

Birdsong rose in the branches above. Somewhere to his left, a squirrel leapt between limbs and vanished. Everything was alive in its usual way — not magical, not strange. But he was different now. He noticed how the shadows curved. How the wind walked between trees. How even the stones on the path seemed to know where they belonged.

He began to walk.

The forest looked familiar again — he recognized the bend where two oaks leaned together like conspirators, the patch of wild berries now small and red and nearly dried. Here, he had passed before. But this time he moved slowly, not because he was unsure, but because every step seemed to belong to something.

The ferns brushed against his legs like old friends.

At the edge of a small clearing, he paused.

There — between two stones — lay the pinecone.

The same one.

He bent and picked it up. It was dry now, the scales tight with age. No pulse, no light. Just a pinecone. And yet, in his hand, it felt like a weight not of wood, but of memory.

He tucked it into his pocket beside the disc.

When he stepped into the clearing, the light ahead changed.

Brighter. Thinner.

The trees were pulling apart.

The forest was ending.

And just beyond the last line of trunks, at the crest of a small hill, he saw the top of a roof.

His roof.

The house.

Still small. Still red.

And in the breeze, a white curtain fluttered in the kitchen window.

The trees gave way gently, as if reluctant to let him go. Their trunks thinned, their roots withdrew from his feet, and the needles no longer carpeted the ground. Grass returned — dry at the edges, dotted with soft clover. Robbin stepped out from under the last pine branch and into the field.

The light here was longer, slanting sideways, gold with the late hour. In the distance, the house stood as it always had. The stone path, the wooden porch, the clothesline that stretched between the two old posts. A blue towel hung with one corner turned inside out. Something fluttered beside it — a ribbon. A yellow one.

He didn't run. He walked slowly, the way one walks through a dream that hasn't quite ended.

The grass rustled under his shoes. A bee drifted past, indifferent. A bird trilled once and fell silent again.

Near the gate, he stopped and looked back. The forest stood behind him. Not darker. Not changed. Just still.

He could no longer see the passage where the rabbit had stood, or the trees where the owl had vanished. But he felt them — not as memories, not as fancies, but as parts of him that had settled without asking.

He turned again toward the house.

The door was open.

Inside, a shadow moved — not quickly, not in alarm. Just the shape of a person going about the end of a day.

He stepped onto the path.

The sound of his feet on stone was soft, but it seemed to echo up through the windows.

Then the shadow turned. His mother stood in the doorway. She didn't speak. She didn't run to him. She simply looked — the way someone looks at the exact thing they've waited for without saying what it cost.

He stepped into the yard. The sun slipped behind a tree, and his shadow stretched long and thin across the porch. She knelt. He walked to her. And when she wrapped her arms around him, he felt the weight of the pinecone and the disc press gently between them.

The house was just as he had left it.

The smell of evening bread still clung to the walls, and the kitchen window rattled faintly in the breeze. The floor creaked in its usual way, and the curtains swayed as though nothing had happened. A cup sat on the table half-full of tea, gone cold. On the counter, a plum with one bite taken from it.

Robbin stepped inside.

His mother stood for a moment longer, one hand resting on the doorway, watching him cross the threshold. She didn't ask where he'd been. She didn't press. She touched his shoulder once, as if to make sure he was real, and then moved to light the stove.

He sat on the stool by the wall, legs swinging, eyes wide not from fear or weariness, but from fullness. There was no need to speak. No need to explain the disc in his pocket or the petal now dried and forgotten in the folds of his shirt. The pinecone lay on the table, and for a while he simply looked at it. In the kitchen light, it seemed to darken, like soil remembering the forest.

His mother hummed softly as she wiped the table.

Outside, the wind bent the trees just slightly, enough to stir a few leaves into the yard. The owl might have been perched in one of them — or not. The rabbit might have passed through the grass just minutes before — or perhaps it never had. But Robbin no longer needed to check.

When the light dimmed and the kettle whistled, he rose and made his way to his room.

The hallway stretched long and cool.

His bed waited, the blanket still rumpled from the morning. The toy wagon in the corner. The small shelf of rocks and feathers. Everything was there.

But he noticed, tucked under his pillow, a small, folded piece of paper.

He picked it up.

Inside, written in a careful hand not his own, were four words:

"Not the last door."

He folded the note and slid it into the drawer beside his bed.

Then he lay down.

The night settled in slowly, brushing its fingers across the roof and along the windowpanes. The stars blinked on, steady and kind.

And before sleep took him, Robbin whispered once into the dark:

“I remember.”